IS IT ALL RIGHT - REALLY?

November 20, 1988

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Luke 12:22-31

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him,..." -Romans 8:28 (RSV)

In Madeleine L'Engle's wonderful account of her mother's final months, The Summer of the Great Grandmother, there are several striking incidents. Early in the book, as her mother, now 90, is becoming weak and disoriented, she is frightened and says:

"Something's wrong. I don't know what it is, but something is wrong."

The author writes, "I put my arms around her as I held my children when they were small and afraid," and said, "It's all right mother." [p. 18-19]

And then, at the conclusion, her mother has died and she is spending a lovely evening tending to her granddaughters. The girls are ready for bed and one says:

"Grandmadeline, is it all right?"

I answered, Yes, Lena, it's all right."

"But Gran, is everything all right? Really?"

And the author comments:

"It is completely cosmic questioning, coming from a small girl in a white nightgown, with a toothbrush in her hand." [p. 245-246]

It is "the" question, isn't it? It is the question before there is any religion. In fact, some might say it is the question for which religion is the answer.

"Is it all right - really?" Beneath the ebb and flow of history, is there a direction, a sensible, meaningful progression or is it all happenstance?

And, beneath the ebb and flow of your life is there something else? Are you alone, abandoned to your own devices, or is there someone else involved?

One time Jesus said: "Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or about your body. God knows what you need. Seek God's kingdom and these things shall be yours as well."

About twenty years later, St. Paul, writing to a group of believers in Rome, near the end of his own life, said: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love God."

Sixteen centuries later William Bradford looked out across Plymouth Bay and wrote in his diary, "Behold, now another providence of God. A ship comes into the harbor."

Those three statements are answers to the question, "Is it all right?" They express a common affirmation that God is involved in providing for our needs; that God is always doing good things in our lives.

The name of the idea is Providence and it has been my experience that we think about it a lot, that some sense of Divine Providence is very close to our theological center.

Certainly no one in all of history ever trusted it more thoroughly than that peculiar community of religious dissenters and rough fortune seekers, perched precariously on the edge of the New World in 1620.

I have always loved the Pilgrims - the romanticized version, stalwart and strong, with starched white collars and broad hats, walking through the snow to church. I loved thinking about them and drawing pictures of them in elementary school. I loved reading Longfellow's Courtship of Miles Standish - John Alden and Priscilla Mullins, - "Speak for yourself John!" And later, as I learned a little more objectivity about them, I loved them more, not less. I love Stephan Vincent Benet's description:

> "They were all alone as few we know are alone.
> They made a small, bustling noise in an empty land."
> ["Western Star," in Sydney Mead, The Lively Experiment.]

The New York Times reported several years ago that Plymouth Rock is, according to the tourists, the most overrated attraction in the East and the biggest disappointment. It's down in a kind of large hole, with a shelter built around it and it's a very ordinary and quite small gray rock. We visited friends in Duxbury two years ago and were driving past it and my friend said - "Oh, there's Plymouth Rock," as if it were no more significant than a gas station. And I said, "stop the car - I have to see it." So he did, reluctantly and I joined a crowd of noisy, hot tourists in t-shirts and shorts, with little children squalling - "Where is it?" and

"Is that all?"... ice cream cones dripping. And I couldn't help it: tears filled my eyes. There it was. They stepped on it or something like it. They were here. And encouraged by my peculiar interest we saw the site where Miles Standish's farm was, a few miles away from the main colony, and John and Priscilla's graves.

Those people believed in Divine Providence, which is the theme of this sermon, and their Thanksgiving tradition is a kind of quintessential observance of God's providence. But before we plow into the heavy theology, let me refresh your memory and tell you something about them.

There were either 101 or 102 of them on board the Mayflower, a tiny ship, just 90 feet long, when it sailed out of Plymouth England in September of 1620. It took 66 days to cross the Atlantic. One of them died in route.

Just 35 were religious dissenters. The other 66 were recruited by backers of the project in order to assure a self-sufficient colony. They sailed up the coast of North America for about a month looking for a good spot to settle and finally came ashore on December 26. Work parties came in daily and began constructing a common house while others looked for food. Their first encounter with native Americans was not friendly and involved an exchange of arrows and shots. The Indians did not return until the following spring. We now know that the entire indigenous population of the eastern seaboard had been decimated by disease: three quarters of the Indian population had died in the few years before the Pilgrims landed.

It was a terrible winter. Bradford records in his diary that on some days two or three persons died, until half of them were gone. On some days only six men were strong enough to work. Stephen Vincent Benet wrote:

> "There is not time to grieve now, there is no time.
> There is only time for the labor in the cold." [op. cit.]

They subsisted on supplies from the Mayflower and through the gray days and cold nights the tiny village continued to rise.

Two English speaking Indians - Samoset and Squanto - befriended them and arranged a meeting with Massassoit, chief of the largest local tribe. The result was the famous advice about placing a dead fish in every corn mound at planting time. By late spring 1621, 50 people were alive, eleven houses were built and the planting was done: 20 acres of corn, six acres of peas and six of barley. The barley - basic component of their beer - did poorly: the peas didn't grow at all and the the colony faced extinction. But the corn grew beautifully and produced two pounds of meal daily per person for the next winter.

And so in the fall of 1621 the fifty knew that they could survive the next winter and they planned an event to celebrate their remarkable achievement. Edward Winslow, one of the Pilgrims, wrote about the event to a friend in England and gave us the only eye-witness account of the first Thanksgiving.

"Our harvest being gotten in, our governor sent four men on fowling, that we might after a special manner rejoice together after we had gathered the fruit of our labor. The four in one day killed as much fowl as... served the company for a week. At which time, amongst other recreations, we exercised our arms, many of the Indians coming amongst us, and among the rest their greatest King, Massassoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which they brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor... And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

There it is again, God's goodness: God's providence when a supply ship appears on the horizon. God's grace when the corn grows and the sun shines. So they thanked God for bringing them through even though fifty of them had died, and for shelter which they had constructed out of logs they had cut and hewn with their backs to the cold wilderness. They thanked God for the food they had planted and tended and which grew with a very pragmatic assist from the Indians. And I suppose part of my adult fascination with them is that they trusted in God's providence in the face of very dismal circumstances, not in the abstract. They trusted God, that is to say, not in a theological seminar on providence, but precisely on those cold, gray days when they had to dig graves for their children in the frozen ground. I suppose I love them so because by celebrating Thanksgiving instead of jumping back on the Mayflower and heading for home, they demonstrated a powerful faith that God would see them through. A medieval mystic, St. John of the Cross, once said: "One act of thanksgiving when things go wrong is worth a thousand when things go well." They knew what that meant.

I also love them because they didn't try to substitute their trust in God's providence for hard work. They trusted God but they also built their cabins in the wilderness and plowed the rocky soil. God would provide... but they understood that providence as a partnership not a welfare system. They weren't in a new Garden of Eden, after all. And clearly they found a way to trust God's providence in the face of historical circumstances completely devoid of any evidence of a divine kindness.

That's the problem of course. If there is a good God who will provide for us, why is there suffering and evil in the world? Why do the children die? If God provided the supply ship, why not a little more consistency... why not a little less hunger and fear? Kristallnacht has reminded us again of the enormous philosophic anomaly created by faith in a good and powerful God whose chosen people are victims of a systematic holocaust. How to believe in God "<u>After Auschwitz?</u>", Rabbi Richard Rubenstein asks.

Part of our intellectual problem is with what the theologians call "Special Providence": i.e. the notion that God intercedes in history to do favors for some people while ignoring the rest. Inevitably when someone has a close brush with tragedy, their joy and relief and gratitude will have a religious dimension. We would all thank God for our survival, if somehow we walked away from a plane crash. But one is left with a very discomforting dilemma. Why me? Why not them? Why does this child go into remission and that child dies?

And part of our problem is with what is called "punitive Providence," the notion that God arranges special treatment for serious offenders. "What did I do to deserve this?" is the way it is expressed. The suggestion that God intercedes with suffering in order to settle accounts with people is even more discomforting.

Jesus not only promised that God would provide, he also said: "It is not God's will that one of these little ones should perish." It is not God's will that children die - ever. Jesus said it, once and for all God does not will death. The Bible is full of life and love and hope and a God of creation and redemption and reconciliation who creates life, wills life, heals life. Why not put it to rest - this grim notion that God's will is involved when people die? Why at every funeral, every wake, do we hear - "It was God's will. God took her home?"

The reason, I now conclude - with a little more personal experience, after simply dismissing the remarks as theologically incorrect for 25 years - the reason is that there is one thought more intolerable than the notion that God wills death and that is that God has nothing at all to do with it: that death happens apart from God; outside the parameters of God's love and grace and power and providence. People say "God willed it" or "God took him," even when they know intellectually it isn't true, because there is a deeper wisdom than reason and that deeper wisdom knows that there is nothing that happens that is totally separated from God. There is nothing - no matter how painful and tragic - that is not, in some way, accessible to God. "In all things God works for good..."

Professor John Knox once observed that the truly radical sense of Jesus' statement about God not willing the death of little ones - is the certainty that the little ones do die. So is God powerless? If God doesn't will it, is God weak, incapable of doing anything about it?

What the Apostle taught - in fact what Paul had learned and to which he wanted to testify - was that even in disastrous circumstances, God is active redemptively, always creating, always transforming, always working for good.

One way, of course, to deal with the theological anomaly of providence is to deny the reality of evil. But that doesn't help. Bad things happen - for two major reasons, I submit. One of them is that we keep doing stupid things. We keep polluting the atmosphere and making ourselves sick. You can catch an intestinal bug in Mexico City by breathing. You no longer have to drink the water. God didn't do that. We did.

You and your loved ones can get mortally ill living in the neighborhood of a plant that dumps radio active waste into the air and ground water. God didn't do that. Our government did.

We kill off 1,000 people every day with respiratory and heart disease directly related to smoking cigarettes. 320,000 to 350,000 of them per year - emphysema, cancer, heart attacks. God doesn't do that to those people. We do. Incredibly - we allow it - we subsidize it - we all support it with our taxes.

Some bad things happen because of human greed and sin and stupidity. And some bad things happen accidentally - because we are free. We do not live in a determined universe. Accidents happens. Cells grow out of control. Airplanes crash. Tornadoes touch down where people live. God doesn't arrange it. It happens because we are free and the universe we live in is free. That freedom is what makes us human and if God violated that freedom we would be less than human.

Every parent knows that. Every adult who remembers anything about childhood knows that parental love is expressed in freedom - giving, not controlling and determining and protecting. One day love allowed you to be free and risk tragedy. One day you walked across the street, or rode a bicycle alone for the first time. And there was a parent who loved you as much as life itself who knew that you could be protected from danger by not venturing out of sight and who also knew that love means granting freedom and living with risk.

"In everything, God works for good with those who love God."

The faith which the Pilgrims brought with them and expressed on a November day in 1621, the faith Jesus was talking about when he advised his disciples not to worry about food and clothing - is a faith that regards God as a third party to every situation. God does not create the situation, but God is in it with us. It is a faith that sees the creative possibility in whatever is happening and knows that God's love is constant and that God's will cannot be destroyed. "Providence," Paul Tillich once wrote, "means that there is a saving possibility... which cannot be destroyed by any event." [The Shaking of the Foundations, p. 111]

We learn that, after all, at the foot of a cross on which God's own Son was put to death. We, as Christians, discuss providence, after all, not as an intellectual curiosity but within our conviction that God somehow turned a hastily arranged and terribly efficient execution into the supreme revelation of love. If God could handle that: if the death of an only Son can come out meaning love - certainly God can deal lovingly and creatively with your troubles and mine.

The promise of God is never that we will be protected and spared. Jesus knew that. So did St. Paul. So did the Pilgrims. The promise is that "In everything God works for good with those who love God."

And so it is finally, did you notice, not only promise, but invitation: invitation to trust this God: to trust that nothing happens which is not accessible to God's creative, redeeming love.

My favorite expression of it - which became a kind of private mantra in recent months, comes from the Middle Ages... from Dame Julian of Norwich, a 14th century Englishwoman, religious mystic, author, who lived through the One Hundred Year War and three epidemics of the Plague. Dame Julian said, and I find myself saying over and over:

"But all shall be well
and all shall be well
and all manner of thing
shall be well."

Trust the promise. Live freely in the promise. Be grateful - deeply grateful for God's promise. In everything God works for good.

Praise be to God.

Amen.